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Activating the Desire to Learn by Bob Sullo

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Introduction

Among the various skills required to be an effective leader, one of the most essential consists of establishing clear theoretical frameworks that facilitate bringing ideas to fruition, and more importantly inspire others to contribute to this process. Among the many schools of thought associated with the field of education, pragmatism, existensionalism, constructivism, and behaviorism, to mention a few that offer theoretical frameworks to follow; external motivation strategies associated with Applied Behavior Analysis or behaviorism are widely implemented. This phenomenon is evident in the nature of the disciplinary codes of conduct many school districts follow, and embedded within the pedagogy. Not surprisingly, it is also palpable in the content of teacher education programs across the nation, and to a degree in research.

Contributing to the leadership knowledge base, Sullo's book consists of providing examples of how internal motivation strategies can be effectively implemented in educational settings, and to an extent it is also a criticism of the popular behavioral methods typically practiced by educational leaders and the culture at large.

Internal motivation techniques in practicum are discussed beginning with theory and research in chapters one and two. This theory is further infused within the context of educational settings, ranging from Elementary school discussed in chapters three through six, to Middle school in chapters seven thorough ten, and culminating with High school in chapters 11-14. The following themes are the foci-points of the theoretical framework explored:

- Nature of Motivation
- Leaders and Motivation
- Increased Productivity and Motivation
- Collaboration and Motivation

The Nature of Motivation

Much discourse surrounds the issue of explaining human behavior and specifically on what motivates people. Extensive research has been conducted on Skinnerian behavioral strategies, and some of the leading researchers in the field, such as George Sugai and Robert Horner amongst others, have developed behavioral models/strategies that have been widely implemented in American schools,

namely the Functional Assessment of Behavior or (FAB), that basically focus on environmental components and external motivators. Other theories completely reject this model on the grounds that it is an incomplete and reductionistic way of portraying human behavior and drives. Amongst these critics are William Powers, who developed the Perceptual Control Theory which emphasizes internal control, as opposed to the external shaping of behavior associated with Behaviorism; and William Glasser, who proposed the Internal Choice Theory, and is an eminent figure in the field of internal psychology.

On this topic, to discuss the nature of motivation and how this impacts individuals, the author proposed engaging in self-evaluation. Sullo masterfully documented very powerful personal accounts and lead the reader through vignettes describing how self-evaluation, inherently internal, contributes to better leadership skills as well as overall performance. To establish the connection between self-evaluation and motivation, he contended that “we continually strive to satisfy the needs that motivate us”. From a leadership perspective, this implies that leaders must be clear at understanding that motivation is individualistic in nature and efficient at determining potential individual motivators, as well as recognizing by what and why they themselves are motivated.

Contributing to the critical undertone of the text, Sullo very craftily wove the rhetoric used to debunk methods associated with Behaviorism into very insightful individual accounts. A wonderful example of this was the story of “Ben”, a psychologist confronted with the experience of self-evaluation. On a personal note, while this book is definitely a great read, some of the contentions made by the author, such as: “We are genetically instructed to seek power” had a psychoanalytic tone but failed to provide evidence for such. Having said this, the author did touch upon another very important element of leadership besides the ability to motivate others, which is purpose. What is the purpose of understanding what motivates people to do their job well? Basically, the sustained performance of organizations is based on understanding purpose and motivation (Fullan, 2001).

Leaders and Motivation

Another potential strength of this book is the applicability of its message to various fields. How a system connects with its external world provides insights on the system’s progress (Pascale, Millemann, and Gioja, 2000). However, too often in educational research, discussing leadership is limited to educational practice, which potentially impedes valuable information from other areas, namely business, from being disseminated. Being a leader encompasses skills that can be applied with equal efficiency directing a school or managing a company. Basically because being an effective leader transcends the product or service being performed and actually focuses on relationships. Some would even argue that what separates effective from ineffective leaders is how much they really care about the people they lead and thus the quality of this relationship (Fullan, 2001).

Along this vein, there has been a recent metamorphosis on views about the specific leadership traits CEO’s and leaders in general should possess in order to increase motivation and thus performance quality. Departing from typically held views that leaders must in a sense follow the ‘cut-throat’ business mentality in order to be effective; Bob Fifer, a well-known consultant for fortune 500 companies, in his book: *The Enlightened CEO: How to Succeed at the Toughest Job in Business*, discussed that an effective leader does so humbly and by example.

Evidence of this phenomenon is epitomized by successful companies such as Costco and Yahoo. James Sinegal, founder and CEO of Costco, still wears the Costco name tag and casual attire of the

workers, in addition to being a long-time advocate of increasing the minimum wage; and Terry S. Semel CEO of Yahoo, offers flexible working hours as well as the ability to work from home.

Focusing on the traits of educational leaders, one of the book's main strengths was its realistic portrayal of the school's culture, down to the seemingly insignificant but actually powerful nuances of teacher's perceptions of administrators. Sullo provided specific strategies ranging from how to effectively arrange a room to convey collaboration as opposed to hierarchy, to developing pertinent interview questions when hiring new personnel. He also subtly but effectively, addressed some of the educational debate surrounding valuing the product, in this case test-scores, over the process, namely learning. In essence, both education and business face similar challenges with regards to effectively learning under circumstances of complex and rapid change (Fullan, 2001).

Increased Productivity and Motivation

The 2001 Randstad North American Employee Review identified three elements that drive employee satisfaction and impact productivity: trust, flexibility, and career mindset. Perhaps surprisingly, success on the job was not found to be correlated to salary; specifically 91% of people surveyed equated success with the trust placed on them to effectively do their job. Additionally, the same survey found that people are more likely to be satisfied with their job when they are given some flexibility on how to perform, produce, or create. To further elaborate on this topic, Sullo contended that people are motivated by activities designed to promote their interests, and are more likely to produce in situations where they are given creative freedom and trust. In essence, leaders must create a working environment where individual needs are potentially met.

Basically according to Sullo, personal needs must be addressed and utilized in order to effectively promote success. Meaning for example, that if an individual has a strong need to socialize this should be taken into account when considering the types of assignments delegated to this person. Leadership focused literature seems to be divided on this issue; from one perspective, while it seems quite reasonable that if one is doing something enjoyable it is more likely to be effectively completed, the practicality of implementing this method in a wide scale must be questioned. Specifically, it can become logistically impossible to manage assigning responsibilities in accordance with people's desires in large settings. Rather, it would seem a better alternative to find out what the individual's specific needs are during the interviewing process in order to determine if these are aligned with the overall plan of action.

Another perspective provided by Michael Fullan in his book: *"Leading in a Culture of Change"*, actually promotes the idea that diverse visions can be channeled effectively into various components that can achieve the same results, stemming from the notion that good leaders actually foster effective leadership skills in others, as opposed to convincing everyone to share the same vision. The main contention posed being that good leadership at various levels creates and prepares future leaders for the sustainability of the entire system. Having said this, an effective administrator or leader must always keep in mind the goals and aspirations of the entire team.

Collaboration and Motivation

As popular views on effective leadership continue to evolve, in the last decade or so the notion of cooperative leadership has taken a significant place in research. Amongst the literature supporting this

notion is David D. Chrislip's *The Cooperative Leadership Fieldbook*, explaining and describing the benefits of 'shared' leadership. Sullo addressed this issue and like Chrislip stressed the importance of establishing healthy work relationships or connections that display and utilize individual strengths.

Continuing this discussion, in the field of education various systemic practices are designed to promote shared leadership. For instance, having teacher, parents and other vested stakeholders participate in the creation of the School Improvement Plan or SIP, where vested stakeholders decide the plan of action for each academic year, as well as document how such will be met. Additionally, various teacher assessment programs are designed to evaluate teacher performance based on input from a team as opposed to solely the administrators. While the idea of shared leadership is progressive and potentially extremely effective, a closer look needs to be taken at actual implementation. Meaning, just because certain programs are designed to promote collegial relationships and distribution of power, it does not mean that this actually occurs in practice. Based on this observation, one of the perceived shortcomings of the text relates to the author's failure to address this issue.

On the topic of the text's potential shortcomings, collaboration is perhaps easier between adults and children because in most cases the adult is the authority figure, therefore leaving no questions as to who outlines responsibilities, establishes limits, and determines time-lines. In using the example of a psychologist's relationship with a student to discuss using internal motivators to promote team building, Sullo perhaps missed the opportunity to illustrate how the much more complex power interactions between adults should be adapted or geared to foster collaboration in the work place. However, within the framework of the vignette on collaboration, the author did provide excellent examples on how to effectively communicate, negotiate differences, and define roles.

"Activating the desire to learn" in addition to providing insights into the complexity of motivational strategies in a rapidly changing culture, is also an essential read for all leaders in the field of education, and highly recommended for any vested professional interested in exploring various ways to effectively motivate others and themselves to produce and become their very best.

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